

AROUND THE COUNTY

'Wayne' leads posse in bus transfer area crack down

By JILL BALLINGER
GAZETTE EDITOR

It's kind of like there's a new sheriff in town, and he's adopted a zero-tolerance policy in terms of rude behavior, foul language and general disrespect around Mariposa County Unified School District buses. Beginning last week, a team of MCHS teachers, led by Wayne Forsythe, took on the issue at the school bus transfer area and literally turned it around.

The bus turnaround at Mariposa County High School has been the place for some troubling behavior, much of it coming from students who have no business in the area because they attend other schools or are not in school at all. The Mariposa County Unified School District has been working on rectifying the problems and behavioral issues and is closer to a solution.

For Forsythe, the impetus behind the mission is simple. "We just want to get the kids on the bus in a safe, efficient manner," he said after supervising the loading area on Tuesday. He said there is no reason that any young student, bus driver or staff member should have to tolerate the language and blatant disrespect that has been occurring.

Already, the number of problems in the area had decreased, but there were still a few issues that Mariposa County Sheriff's deputies had to handle.

Mariposa County Sheriff Brian Muller is happy to help with the issue. "We appreciate the concerns of school staff in

dealing with local youth who have no legitimate business being on the school grounds or around the buses," he said. "School staff members are committed to providing a safe and healthy environment for their students, and it is our duty to assist and support them in their efforts."

Muller continued, "School staff should not have to tolerate the disrespectful attitude, vulgar language and defiant actions of these individuals. We are prepared to provide assistance to the district in identifying those youth who are creating problems, and we will take immediate enforcement action when appropriate."

MCUSD's complicated bus schedule has, until this week, made a long wait for Spring Hill High School students at the turnaround. They are often joined by students from the adjacent Sierra Home School site and others who flat don't belong there. Some teens get a ride to the area and have no connection to the school or buses.

A quick meeting last week between administration and transportation officials solved part of that. The bus now leaves SHHS 10 minutes later. The school's daily bulletin also warns loiterers that they will be cited if they are in the area.

Meanwhile, the school district has been working to rectify all kinds of behavioral problems on the buses which travel some 1,600 miles every day. Director of Maintenance, Operations and Transportation Bob Morse said the issue was originally brought up by a board member, and he established a committee to deal



GAZETTE PHOTO BY JILL BALLINGER

MCHS TEACHER WAYNE FORSYTHE (LEFT) AND MARIPOSA COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPUTY KEVIN PACKARD DEAL WITH YOUTH WHO DON'T BELONG NEAR THE SCHOOL BUS TURNAROUND AT THE SCHOOL. THE SCHOOL DISTRICT IS WORKING ON A PLAN TO ALLEVIATE BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS ON SCHOOL BUSES.

with it. It consists of bus drivers, substitute drivers and administration. Tom Audas is the committee's chairperson.

Audas said the committee saw a need to increase communication between transportation and the school sites.

Morse said, "It's coming along. We've made some progress." His department is working on a manual for school sites and bus drivers that he hopes will be ready for the next school year.

Morse said some of the problems on the buses are skateboard issues, rough-

housing and students picking on each other. Audas said he has seen a bit more vandalism to buses this year, too.

For a while earlier this year, the bus that takes students back to the Lake Don Pedro area was of particular concern. Morse said there were "some pretty big issues" on the route that can be as long as an hour and a half for some students.

Things have changed, however. "Those kids have done an about face. They've really

turned it around."

Morse joined Forsythe and other faculty at the bus turnaround on Tuesday. He said the message is a simple one. "If you're not getting on a bus, you're not hanging around here. We're sending you down the road."

Morse said school bus transportation remains at the top of the safest ways to travel. "It's still safer to ride a school bus than to walk, ride a bike or get a ride to school," he said.

County and SMA settle

No layoffs or furloughs are necessary

Despite tough budget times and big financial problems in other California counties, Mariposa County and its Sheriff's Management Association (SMA) have reached a contract agreement. Both the County and SMA had positive things to say about the contract and the negotiation process.

According to SMA President Doug Binnewies, the issues discussed during the negotiation process focused primarily on items of parity with other existing County employee associations. "Through the negotiation process, the SMA was able to achieve its objectives while

shielding the County from any cost increases beyond what has already been budgeted in the current fiscal year," Binnewies said.

"We, the SMA, and the County arrived at an agreement that is fair, reasonable and economically responsible," Binnewies added.

County Administrative Officer Rick Benson agreed, saying everyone involved was "realistic" throughout the process. "We appreciate their understanding and willingness to work with us during these tight financial times," Benson said of the SMA.

Binnewies said his organization recognized the financial constraints on the County. "Membership is cognizant of the hardships that are being faced by all, in-

cluding employers," he said. "The association is pleased that it was able to work collectively with the County to secure an agreement while protecting its membership from layoffs and/or furloughs."

Among the contract agreement specifics are the implementation of court pay for those individuals who have to return to appear in court during their off duty time, the allowance of overtime for exempt employees during a major incident or disaster and the increase of sick leave to care for a sick family member and an increase in bereavement leave.

Coakley Circle closes

Mariposa County Roads Division will be doing construction on Coakley Circle on March 8 and 9 from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. There will be a temporary closure of Coakley Circle between Jessie Street and the entrance to Pioneer Market.



GAZETTE PHOTO BY JILL BALLINGER

MARIPOSA COUNTY SHERIFF'S SERGEANT MARK JONES TALKS WITH A STUDENT WHO WAS ASKED TO LEAVE THE BUS TURNAROUND AREA ON TUESDAY BUT TRIED TO RETURN. A NUMBER OF YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE BEEN REMOVED FROM THE AREA BY PROBATION AND DEPUTIES IN RECENT DAYS.

Reception set for Hertfelder

The public is invited to attend a farewell reception for Mariposa County Public Works Director Dana Hertfelder. Residents are requested to participate in the event that will mark Hertfelder's distinguished and dedicated service to Mariposa County.

The reception will take place on Tuesday, March 16 at 1 p.m. in the board of supervisors' chambers at the government center.

Indian Council holds its annual meeting

The American Indian Council of Mariposa County, also known as the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation, will be holding its annual meeting of members on March 4, at 7:30 p.m. at the Miwu Mati Healing Center. Elections are to be for the offices of vice-chair, treasurer and M.A.C.T. delegate.

Proposed agenda items include an amendment to by-laws and a proposal to raise dues to \$5 a year and issue cards valid for only the calendar year purchased. All tribal members are encouraged to attend.